

GUIDANCE

Regulatory External Quality Assurance of Apprenticeship End-Point Assessments

A guide for End-Point Assessment Organisations, professional bodies and employers

The logo for Ofqual, featuring the word 'ofqual' in a bold, lowercase, sans-serif font. The 'o' and 'f' are connected, as are 'q' and 'u'. The letters 'a' and 'l' are also connected. The logo is positioned on a light green background that forms a large triangle on the left side of the page.

Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| About this document | 3 |
| Working with employers | 3 |
| End-Point Assessment Plans | 4 |
| Additional information | 4 |
| The recognition process for End-Point Assessment Organisations | 5 |
| Additional information | 6 |
| Ensuring readiness | 6 |
| Additional information | 7 |
| Monitoring EPA | 7 |
| Additional information | 9 |
| Reporting | 9 |
| Additional information | 10 |
| Using EQA to improve assessment | 10 |
| Additional information | 10 |
| Taking regulatory action | 11 |
| Additional information | 11 |

About this document

This document outlines how Ofqual undertakes External Quality Assurance (EQA) of Apprenticeship End-Point Assessments (EPAs). Taking a step-by-step approach, we give an overview of the range of activities we will undertake and explain how these align to the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (the Institute's) [EQA Framework](#).

The purpose of this document is to inform End-Point Assessment Organisations (EPAOs), so that they know what to expect from EQA provided by a regulator, with statutory powers.

Apprentices and employers are the beneficiaries of EQA. It ensures that EPAOs work to a high standard, delivering fair and reliable EPAs which deliver the outcomes that are required. This document also informs employers and, in some sectors, the professional bodies who represent them, about where we will draw on their expertise and how they can contribute to EQA and provides them and apprentices with assurance of the rigour with we approach EQA.

Every organisation recognised by Ofqual, including EPAOs, has to comply with our General Conditions. We have established specific EPA conditions to ensure that conditions that are not appropriate to EPAs are dis-applied, and also provided additional rules to secure the quality of EPAs.

Throughout the document you will find additional information. Particularly references to the relevant section of the Institute's EQA Framework, links to the related sections of Ofqual's General Conditions, otherwise known as the Ofqual handbook, and links to additional reports and useful information sources.

Working with employers

The views of employers are crucial to ensuring quality in the apprenticeship system. Assessment plans, developed by trailblazer groups of employers, ensure that the knowledge, skills and behaviours assessed through the EPA, are relevant and appropriate for the occupation. The Institute is establishing a directory of professional and employer-led bodies (the Employer Directory)¹. We will draw from this to ensure employer expertise and insight supports EQA and informs our work. Further details on how we will do this are described in context below.

¹ See <https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/media/4423/eqa-response-04082020.pdf>, section 2.4 for details

End-Point Assessment Plans

It is vital that all apprentices complete a high-quality EPA and that this is delivered consistently, irrespective of where or when they undertake it, and which EPAO delivers it. The assessment plan is the document that sets out for each particular standard which assessment methods will be used, and how they will be deployed to assess the apprentices' occupational competence at the end of their apprenticeship. Effective quality control is essential to ensure that this plan clearly and accurately sets out how the knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs) will be assessed, and can be interpreted consistently by different EPAOs. Equally, it is important, that employers have confidence that it will assess whether an apprentice does have the KSBs that demonstrate competence in the occupation.

[Institute's EQA Framework August 2020](#)

Approval of the Assessment Plan, developed by employers from across an occupation, is the responsibility of the Institute. We provide high-level advice to the Institute ahead of the approval by the Institute about whether the assessment can be regulated to meet the Institute's mission. Having taken this into account, the Institute approve assessment plan.

It is crucial that EPAOs interpret assessment plans correctly. Regulated EPAOs are able to raise queries to support their interpretation of the plans directly with us through the Ofqual portal. We then work to resolve and provide clarification through our Assessment Plan Query Group (APQG). The group comprises experts in apprenticeship policy and assessment design.

We may draw on members of the Employer Directory or professional bodies to provide clarification, advice or sector insight to inform the resolution of queries raised about assessment plans. Use of sector expertise from the Employer Directory is particularly likely in this context where the Trailblazer group is no longer operational.

We aim to respond to queries swiftly and may issue additional guidance for EPAOs on a particular plan if required. Where it becomes evident that there is a more substantive concern, for example through consistent misinterpretation, then this is fed back to the Institute who will consider this.

Additional information

- [listings of the standards](#) for which Ofqual is the EQA provider, and those which are in the process of transfer to Ofqual
- [findings from Ofqual's review of apprenticeship assessment plans](#)
- [The Institute's EQA Framework](#) – section 1

The recognition process for End-Point Assessment Organisations

Delivery of EPA by organisations that are proven to have the sector and assessment expertise, capacity and capability, will help to ensure that apprentices have a rigorous and fair experience of assessment, and will increase employer confidence in EPA as a relevant and reliable test of occupational competence.

Institute's EQA Framework August 2020

All EPAOs who deliver EPAs for which Ofqual is the EQA provider, need to be recognised by Ofqual. The recognition process is the means through which Ofqual assures employers and apprentices that EPAOs have the right resource, capacity and capability to design, develop and deliver quality EPAs. EPAOs are also required to be listed on the ESFA's [Register of End-Point Assessment Organisations](#) (RoEPAO). From November 2020, inclusion on the RoEPAO is subject to prior achievement of Ofqual recognition for the relevant standard.

Applying for recognition is a consistent process for all applicants across all of Ofqual's regulatory activity. Irrespective of scale or type of organisation we evaluate all recognition applications against the same [Criteria for recognition](#). Recognition is awarded to the organisation, and confirms which EPAs the EPAO is recognised to offer on a standard-by-standard basis. Contextualising factors, such as specialism or scale of operation are borne in mind, and applications are judged in proportion to the breadth of the activity of the applicant organisation.

Application for Ofqual recognition is an evidence-based process. Applicants are required to demonstrate they have the assessment and occupational expertise, and have systems and processes in place to develop, design and deliver EPAs.

To facilitate applicants' understanding of the process of applying for recognition, and to enable them to be clear about expectations of an EPAO, we provide a clear point of contact for each organisation seeking to apply. We also provide a range of additional information, resources and briefings, for example, case [studies from EPAOs](#) who have gained Ofqual recognition.

Where our criteria are met, we have the flexibility to use special conditions of recognition for individual EPAOs to manage areas of potential risk. Special conditions are specific requirements which can be tailored to support organisations post-recognition where areas of concern are raised during the process. One benefit of this arrangement is that it can be used to support EPAOs who have a niche focus, and have demonstrated they meet the criteria, but may have limited experience of assessment.

A special condition, for example, may require an EPAO to provide evidence of a strengthened procedure before they can proceed with delivery of an EPA. Such conditions safeguard the assessment quality or delivery. Alternatively, a special condition may limit the number of assessments that may take place within a certain time period in order to protect the operations of the EPAO, and monitor their capacity to meet employer requirements.

Depending on the nature of the relationship between the EPAO and other organisations, special conditions can also support the management of potential conflicts of interest, or require the review of materials by an independent third party to be carried out.

As part of the recognition application, we take a forward look at the totality of the intended scope of delivery of the EPAO and consider their capacity and capability to deliver all that they propose. Once recognised by Ofqual, an EPAO may wish to expand the number and range of EPAs it offers. This is an iterative process, done on a standard by standard basis. Thus, their capacity and capability are revisited through the process of expanding their scope of recognition.

We may seek information from professional bodies [and/or] through the Employer Directory to supplement the evidence submitted by applicants in their recognition application. We may also seek information from ESFA, and if relevant other EQA providers and the ESFA. Where there is successful end-point assessment delivery to date, we aim to understand this and take it in to account.

Additional information

- [apply to have your qualifications regulated](#)
- [End-Point Assessment Organisation recognition briefing](#)
- sections of the Ofqual Handbook that are particularly relevant to the registration process for EPAOs are:
 - Section A: [Governance](#)
 - Section B: [The awarding organisation and Ofqual](#)
- [The Institute's EQA Framework](#) – section 2

Ensuring readiness

EPAOs must be ready to deliver assessment at the point at which an apprentice successfully completes their training programme and is confirmed as ready to take the end-point assessment by their employer and training providers.

[Institute's EQA Framework August 2020](#)

A significant amount of EPAO-level readiness to deliver is confirmed through the recognition process itself as has been described above. Another way we review readiness is through technical evaluation – which is a review of assessment materials that support delivery of the EPA.

Technical evaluation enables us to consider whether the EPA can reliably test the knowledge, skills and behaviours specified in the apprenticeship standard and assessment plan; be graded in-line with the assessment plan and enable results to be trusted as a measure of what an apprentice knows and can do. Technical evaluation is a core component of EQA, and is used as part of monitoring EPAs, as it allows us to identify risks across and within apprenticeship standards, to identify emerging trends over time, and to maintain delivery standards across EPAOs.

Further details of what is involved in Technical Evaluation, the process, timeframes and how this operates can be found in this [focused publication](#).

We use both assessment and industry experts, including drawing them from the Employer Directory, to carry out our technical evaluation of EPA materials. This approach allows us to combine assessment expertise with subject expertise to make an informed judgement on assessment materials.

Assessment experts could have experience of being a teacher, assessor, examiner or an academic. Industry experts will have experience in a particular industry as a practitioner. They complement the review process by providing an occupational view of what is required in different standards and at different levels. We will look to draw industry experts from those organisations listed on the Employer Directory and their memberships.

Additional information

- [findings from Ofqual's technical evaluation of apprenticeship End-Point Assessment materials](#)
- sections of the Ofqual Handbook that are particularly relevant to EPAO readiness are:
 - Section A: [Governance](#)
 - Section E: [Design and development of qualifications](#)
- [The Institute's EQA Framework](#) – section 3

Monitoring EPA

Ensuring that the actual delivery of EPA provides a relevant, reliable and independent assessment of occupational competence.

[Institute's EQA Framework August 2020](#)

As a statutory regulator, there are many ways in which we can monitor EPA delivery. Monitoring enables us to identify good practice and where things are going well, pinpoint where there are areas that need to be addressed or improve, and to refine our understanding of risk. This is important as we take a risk-based approach, targeting our activities where we have greatest concern where our work will have greatest impact in preventing things from going wrong.

We draw on broad range of intelligence and data to identify and monitor EPAOs and EPAs, assessment methods and assessment across each sector. We have a range of expertise, tools and legal powers on which we can draw. Section 4 of the Institute's EQA Framework lists many of these. Here we provide greater detail of a few that we will draw on particularly as we monitor EPA delivery.

We will take the opportunity to observe EPAs in delivery, and engage with EPAOs as they are undertaking their operations. We will confirm arrangements with EPAOs in advance, being mindful of burden on them as we do so. Field visits and observations of EPAs to date have supported our risk analysis of EPAs and EPAOs and we will build on this going forward.

Through monitoring we are seeking to ensure EPAs are delivered appropriately and consistently. We will seek to secure evidence and insights that can be used to address risks and ensure that EPAs are a sufficiently valid and reliable measure of occupational competence. Monitoring will include, but is not limited to:

- assessor recruitment, training and standardisation

- preparation and organisation of EPA delivery
- observation of live assessments
- management of conflicts of interest
- standardisation and moderation of awarding
- processes for dealing with malpractice, maladministration, complaints and enquires

Audits are used to gather and evaluate evidence of EPAOs' compliance with our Conditions. Undertaken by an internal team of trained auditors, audits are detailed consideration of documents and processes, involving desk-based analysis, site visits and meetings. The outcome of an audit is a determination of how assured we are that an EPAO is effectively managing specific risks to compliance.

Audited EPAOs receive a feedback report, and where appropriate, thematic findings from audits are shared with all awarding organisations and EPAOs so that they may learn from the good practice and matters we have identified.

The compliance of every EPAO and monitoring of their standards of operation and delivery will be monitored, including through detailed data collections. We will collect some data, as specified in Section 4 of the [EQA Framework](#), regularly.

We will also collect some data on request to deepen understanding of particular risks and areas of concern. For example, asking EPAOs to provide us with data on the grades awarded to individual apprentices, for each assessment component (method) of the EPA and for the EPA as a whole, gives us an insight into overall and component pass rates within and across Apprenticeship Standards.

When such requests are made, EPAOs are made aware of the request well in advance and provided with guidance on what is required – including the timeframe, format of the information and any supporting information that may be necessary. We also regularly commission programmes of qualitative and quantitative research to inform our regulatory approach.

We also gather insights from employers, including their perspectives and experience of EPAs and EPAOs. These assist us in confirming that EPAs are reliable assessments of occupational competence and are being appropriately conducted. Apprentices and employers are always welcome to share their perspectives on EPAs and make us aware of successes and concerns. We will also draw on those that are part of the Employer Directory to provide the views and experiences of their profession and sector.

Intelligence, including that provided by employers and apprentices, informs our risk-based monitoring. This in turn feeds into the review of risks across the EPA landscape, which is led by the Institute and which is done jointly with Ofqual, OfS and ESFA. Risk monitoring also informs how we determine and target our EQA activities, so that they can have the greatest impact.

Ofqual regulated EPAOs are required to communicate with us, through an 'event notification,' about any incident which has, or could have, an 'Adverse Effect.' An Adverse Effect is any action, omission, event, incident, or circumstance which might:

- negatively impact learners and their EPA, or,
- limits the ability of the EPAO to develop or deliver the EPA, or,

- damage public confidence in the EPA may be considered an.

Therefore, identifying what constitutes an Adverse Effect requires an element of judgement on the behalf of the EPAO, but examples would be:

- substantial errors in assessment materials
- loss, theft, or a breach of confidentiality in any assessment materials
- failures in delivery
- issuing incorrect results
- malpractice or maladministration

In addition to all of the processes listed here, regulated EPAOs are required to submit to us a Statement of Compliance. Undertaken at least annually, this statement, detailed in section [B2 of the Ofqual handbook](#), is a self-declaration, around which there are specific governance arrangements for its completion which the EPAO needs to follow. It is a question-based statement issued directly to EPAOs and in which we ask them to state:

- state either that they are fully compliant with our Conditions, or,
- identify instances where they are not compliant and the date by which they expect to rectify this matter, and,
- if they believe that they will not be able to comply with any of our Conditions in the foreseeable future, usually the next twelve months

Additional information

- [bespoke EPA level conditions and requirements](#)
- sections of the Ofqual Handbook that are particularly relevant for the monitoring of EPA delivery are:
 - Section B: [the awarding organisation and Ofqual](#)
 - Section D: [General conditions and requirements](#)
 - Section G: [Setting and delivering the assessment](#)
- [The Institute's EQA Framework](#) – section 4

Reporting

The Institute oversees the EQA Framework, provides consolidated reports for EPAOs and looks holistically at the delivery of EQA and findings across all standards. The Institute's Quality Assurance Committee provides governance and oversight, makes recommendations and ensures that the Institute is meeting its statutory duties.

[Institute's EQA Framework August 2020](#)

Reports provide evidence to support improvements to the delivery of EPA, and will therefore include examples of good practice, recommendations and / or action points to enable that. Reports will be made available to EPAOs, the Institute and, where appropriate to their purpose, content and nature, employers and the wider public.

Some reports will summarise key findings across all activities, whilst others will be large thematic reports; likewise, some reports may make particular recommendations relevant to specific standards, or identified EPAOs.

In line with the EQA Framework, we will provide a report to the Institute on each EPAO's delivery of each standards at least once in every three-year period; and the Institute may choose to publish all or part of these reports. In all cases, reports will inform the planning of future activities, ensuring risks are managed. But most importantly, they enable the sharing of good practice and areas of strength, alert EPAOs to areas that require address, and encourage continuous improvement across EPAOs and their EPAs.

We expect to publish and disseminate findings, reports and evaluations from EQA activities to inform the wider system. We look forward to working with members of the Employer Directory to help us with this dissemination, to support them in promoting apprenticeships in their sector.

Additional information

- [The Institute's EQA Framework](#) – section 5

Using EQA to improve assessment

Ensuring that all organisations within the apprenticeship assessment system learn from the findings of EQA and are able to make improvements as a result.

[Institute's EQA Framework August 2020](#)

Any activity undertaken with an EPAO through our EQA activity is accompanied by specific feedback to the organisation involved. Any audit, monitoring or intelligence gathering visit also includes a written feedback report to EPAOs who are given the opportunity to comment on the findings before any analysis is completed.

Reports, such as those that come from technical evaluation for example, and feedback are the start of an on-going conversation with EPAOs focussed on improving assessment. This principle holds true for all our EQA activity.

We provide regular opportunities for EPAOs to engage with us and their peers through sector fora, webinars and other meetings. For example, we have held collaborative discussions between EPAOs working on the Customer Service EPAs and facilitated discussion between EPAs working in the Hair and Beauty sector with the relevant professional bodies. Whatever their scope, such engagements are an opportunity to collaboratively resolve issues, raise concerns, share good practice, and discuss reports and findings.

Through disseminating findings, sharing insights and providing their feedback employers play an important role in the continuous improvement of assessment. Their participation in route or sector-based fora increase the value of these sessions, helping EPAOs deepen their understanding of employers' expectations and sector requirements. We will look to the members of the Employer Directory to participate in this way.

Additional information

- [The Institute's EQA Framework](#) – section 6

Taking regulatory action

Ensuring problems affecting EPAs are remedied as quickly and effectively as possible so that any risk to the quality of assessment is minimised, encompassing statutory regulatory action and enforcement

[Institute's EQA Framework August 2020](#)

Protecting the interests of an apprentice is a primary focus. When an EPAO we regulate has a problem that directly affects EPA development or delivery or something goes wrong, there are several different things we can do. The goal is to take the appropriate action, using our statutory regulatory powers, that will best remedy the situation.

We will also act to bring the EPAO back into compliance with our rules, thus ensuring that they are operating in such a way that best meets the requirements of employers and apprentices. We have a range of tools to do this, from directing an EPAO to do or stop doing things or in extreme cases fine an organisation or remove their recognition status.

Where recognition status is removed, working with ESFA, we will look to protect the interests of learners including transferring them to another EPAO should be that the best course of action. In all cases, any action we take aims to be proportionate in rectifying non-compliance.

Additional information

- [Taking Regulatory Action](#)
- [The Institute's EQA Framework](#) – section 7



© Crown Copyright 2020

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated.

To view this licence, visit

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/

or write to

Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU

Published by:

ofqual

Earlsdon Park
53-55 Butts Road
Coventry
CV1 3BH

0300 303 3344
public.enquiries@ofqual.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofqual